

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000343

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA'S OBASANJO ON ZIMBABWE

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CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER. REASON 1.5(b).

¶11. (C) Summary: Nigerian President Obasanjo February 14 told DAS Bridgewater and Ambassador Jeter that Tsanvirgai had made a mistake by going to court. Dialogue was not possible under the circumstances, and it made no sense to continue sanctions, still less since Australia had implemented additional measures outside those established by the Commonwealth. Obasanjo urged the US and UK to be patient and supportive; Africans would produce the desired results, though perhaps not on the West's schedule. End Summary.

OBASANJO RECOMMENDS AN END TO SUSPENSION

¶12. (C) In response to visiting AF DAS Bridgewater's query, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo February 14 confirmed that he had recommended an end to Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth in a letter to Australian Prime Minister Howard and South African President Mbeki. DAS Bridgewater replied that the USG urged him to reconsider that position. "Why?" Obasanjo asked. Because there needs to be dialogue between the GOZ and the opposition first, DAS Bridgewater answered. With what opposition? Obasanjo wanted to know. Primarily the MDC, DAS Bridgewater responded.

¶13. (C) Obasanjo contended that Tsvangirai and the MDC had precluded dialogue by going to court. Obasanjo said he had counseled Tsvangirai against such a step: "We have a saying here; when you are in court, you cannot be friends." If your case is in court, you cannot have dialogue. The MDC argued that it had to file suit within a limited period of time or lose the right to contest the election and that it had been urged to pursue legal redress if it wanted to contest the results, Obasanjo continued. Therefore, the MDC had gone to court despite its early rejection of that course of action. Now, the case had been in court for over a year, with no progress. "I told [Tsvangirai] that his case could be in court for five years and nothing would happen." Obasanjo remarked that he and Mbeki also objected to the Australian decision to implement sanctions that went beyond those prescribed by the Commonwealth.

LET US SOLVE IT THE AFRICAN WAY

¶14. (C) Acknowledging the Nigerian efforts, DAS Bridgewater said the USG would continue to provide humanitarian relief. Obasanjo cut in, "We should press for realistic things. I have always pleaded, as I did with Cote d'Ivoire, to let us [Africans] take care of it. You should stand behind and give us support." Obasanjo went on to describe steps ECOWAS had taken toward resolving the conflict and hinting that some of the false starts and stumbling blocks resulted from the well-meaning but ill-advised proposals of non-Africans.

¶15. (C) Returning to Zimbabwe and the MDC's court case, Obasanjo rhetorically asked what he should do. Ambassador Jeter wondered what Tsvangirai's response to the implicit advice to drop the court challenge had been. "He seemed confused," Obasanjo replied. "he wanted to keep his options open."

¶16. (C) Obasanjo rhetorically moved northward, saying that the key to the success of Kenya's elections was that Africans had convinced arap Moi that he really had to give up power. "That is what we must try with Mugabe." Obasanjo said he had told the Zimbabwean that he (Obasanjo), though younger than Mugabe, was already making plans for succession. Mugabe should do the same thing. "I broached it with him, and he said, 'Oh, that

is difficult.'" Had he even thought about it, wondered DAS Bridgewater. "No, he had not," Obasanjo replied.

17. (C) "I think the British influence has been negative on this issue," Obasanjo offered, arguing that HMG wanted too much, too fast. African leaders should have time to work on Mugabe, to convince him to give up power without feeling pressured to do so. "It may not be at your speed, Obasanjo concluded, but we'll get there."

COMMENT

18. (C) Zimbabwean opposition reaction (refs A&B) to the letter was swift, denunciatory and vigorous. The domestic profile of this issue is lower, and also lower now than it was six months or a year ago. For this part, Obasanjo has become more relaxed and confident about addressing it. A year ago, he avoided the Ambassador for nearly six weeks in order to preclude a discussion on Zimbabwe. This time, Obasanjo sought out Ambassador Jeter to give him a heads-up; the Ambassador, however, was in Katsina at the time and could not return to Abuja in time for the requested appointment. While the USG and the GON are unlikely to see eye-to-eye on Zimbabwe, the way to genuine dialogue is open, and with it the possibility to influence Obasanjo positively. End comment.

19. (U) Ambassador Bridgewater cleared this message.

JETER